

Opening the curtain by Jancys-Blue-Bayou

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Summary: "Imagine if we just told it, just wrote down all that really happened." It's a thought she's entertained many times in the past. Ever since they together with Murray watered down the real story to a chemical leak to get justice for Barb. They had to do it then, to get justice. But really she hates having to have watered it down. She knows the truth and she wishes it was out there.

1. Chapter 1

She dials the number she has memorized quicker than any. It's ringing. One ring, and just before the second one he picks up, just like he did yesterday and the day before that and the one before that and...

"Hey," he answers in his deep, warm, comforting voice.

"Hey," she says and after a beat adds: "I miss you so much."

"I miss you too. I love you."

"I love you."

It's the same start as to all the phone calls they've had since he moved almost a week ago. He called her soon as they got to St. Louis and they've talked on the phone every night since, for hours each time. Tonight she has something new to ask him, since fall break is over. "So how did school go?"

He sighs before answering.

"You know what's worse than being the new kid in class in the middle of senior year?"

"No?"

"Being the new kid in class in the middle of senior year *who just moved here from Hawkins.*"

"Aw, I'm sorry. Was it bad?" She asks even though she knows the answer. This was a worry Jonathan expressed to her soon as the move was final. He was very much not looking forward to having to start at a new school in the middle of senior year, full of new people and having to be the new kid, the one from the now infamous town at that.

"Yeah. I wasn't even going to mention it but the teacher said it. Everyone stared at me like I was an alien or something. So much for blending in."

"Ugh, I'm so sorry."

"Someone did come up to talk to me though."

"Oh?"

"To ask me if it's true that the 'chemical leak' made everyone in town crazy psychopaths and if I came here to escape it or if I knew people who died in the fire."

"Oh."

"Everyone else just stares and whispers behind your back."

"Oh. That sucks. I wish I could come to St. Louis right now and kick their ass. Every single stupid kid at your stupid school."

"Me too. Because then you'd be here."

"I know. I wish I was."

"I wish you were too."

"Have you told your mom? About school."

"No, I don't want her to feel bad about that. Think she already knows I didn't want to move and feels bad about it enough."

"Yeah. She had her reasons though."

"I know. Still, think she's second-guessing herself. She hates her new job too, apparently her boss is an asshole, not at all like Donald."

"That sucks. Tell her I said hi. And Will and El of course."

"Yeah, they say hi too. So, how's Hawkins?"

"Eh, like it is. Ghost town. Except for the reporters still coming from out of town. Did you see the *Cutting Edge* report?"

"Yeah."

"I still see reporters everywhere, at what's left of the mall, and at city

hall and stuff. If only they knew the real story."

"Yeah."

"Imagine if we just told it, just wrote down all that really happened."

It's a thought she's entertained many times in the past. Ever since they together with Murray watered down the real story to a chemical leak to get justice for Barb. They had to do it then, to get justice. But really she hates having to have watered it down. She knows the truth and she wishes it was out there. People should know what really happened then. And all that's happened since.

"Hah, yeah. People wouldn't believe us."

"Yeah I know. But still, I keep thinking about it. And like, given all that's happened, what's being told now... maybe people would believe at least a bit more. Of the real story. I wonder what would happen if we opened the curtain a bit more," she muses.

"What did you have in mind?" Jonathan asks. She detects caution in his voice. And she knows he's right to be, she knows it's too risky. She just wishes they could do *something* more.

"I don't know I..." she hesitates, realizing maybe it's not a good idea to talk about this over the phone. The Lab is gone but... are they still listening? She hasn't thought about it for a long time, kind of figured after the Lab shut down so did the surveillance but... she can't be certain of that. "Never mind. We maybe shouldn't... maybe we should talk about something else, something less depressing."

"Yeah..." Jonathan answers with weight behind it after a slight pause. She senses he understands the real meaning behind her words, behind her sudden change of mind. "How's Mike?"

"Missing his girlfriend like crazy. And Will," she answers, thankful for his change of topic.

They continue talking about safe topics for hours until they're both in bed. About their siblings and school and St. Louis and the job at the gas station he managed to secure yesterday and Thanksgiving when they'll finally see each other again. And a lot about missing each

other. She falls asleep to the sound of him breathing and wishes he was here or she was there so she could hear it better and feel him holding her. So she wouldn't be alone.

She's alone when she goes to sleep, she's alone when she wakes up. She's always alone now it feels like. She goes to school and there's no Jonathan, and no Barb. No Steve even since he's graduated. She sees him around town sometimes but it's odd, they know they can trust each other when it matters, in life and death situations but just seeing each other out and about in non threatening situations feels weird, they don't really have anything to talk about then. They're just too different, she feels. But they'll always share... all this *shit* they've been put through.

School is so goddamn weird now. Not only because Jonathan isn't there anymore, or Barb. But also because Heather Holloway and almost a dozen other students are just gone too. Due to the "fire" at the mall. She can't believe they managed to sell that story. 30 people dead in freak fire at the mall — at night. Why would 30 random townspeople be at the mall at night on the 4th of July? She's so tired. So tired of sitting through memorials for dead classmates knowing the truth of what really happened but not being allowed to say it. Having the answers to all the questions she hears people ask again and again: What were they doing at the mall, why did my son/daughter/husband/wife/mother/father/sister/brother/uncle/aunt/grandma/grandpa just randomly leave the fair/house/park/whatever? How did any of this happen? What happened to our town?

But not being able to share the answers. She knows it all. And people should know what she knows. Ideally, everything. But she knows that may not be possible... at least not all right away. But they need to know more. At least know for real who is responsible for destroying their town, who has blood on their hands. The government. People has started to lose trust in the government, with the chemical leak story, with the mall fire story and Mayor Kline's downfall. But it's not enough. That's not even close to enough. People should know how dark and twisted and evil and insidious their government is. How it spies on them, how it experiments on them, how it kills and covers up.

At lunch she sits with Ally and some of the other girls in their class.

At least they accepted her joining their table when she had to rejoin the cafeteria after Jonathan moved away and lunch couldn't be spent with him on the hood of his car anymore. That's something at least, but it feels stilted and not just because she didn't hang around them much for months but in the way something feels off for the whole school. Everyone's still reeling and adjusting after everything. Not only the gaping hole in the student body but also all the other lost lives. Ally lost her uncle. They don't talk much about that. She expressed her condolences several times and held her tongue every time Ally mentioned how none in the family can understand why on earth he just walked away from the fairground, leaving Ally's young cousins behind, to disappear off to the mall. They all have stories like that. There's 30.000 people in town. 30 of them died at once. Everyone at the least knows someone who knew someone who died.

She eats quickly and excuses herself to the library. Because she's fed up with it. With being alone in this hell town. The people responsible for her loneliness is the ones responsible for turning dreary old Hawkins into Hell Town, USA. They killed everyone. They made this into a place that Joyce felt she couldn't stay in anymore. They changed Hawkins from her boring old hometown that she was looking forward to getting out of one day to a ghost town she's desperate to escape. She writes a letter to Jonathan. She's never written him a letter before, never had cause to, but now she has. Because whether he's here or 330 miles away he's hers. Her boyfriend, soulmate and partner in truth-seeking and monster hunting. And it feels safer to take this per letter rather than the phone.

Dear Jonathan

I miss you lots and love you more. But we can talk more about that on the phone. But I didn't want to say this over the phone last night, maybe I'm paranoid but I want to be safe.

I'm done with this, keeping my mouth shut and not saying anything. The truth needs to be out there. People need to know what really happened. Maybe not everything, but as much as possible. At least more than they know now. A chemical leak, a freak fire? It's not good enough. More than 30 people are dead and people don't know how they really died but they don't accept the story they've been fed. Not really. The chemical leak story

was one thing, but the fire at the mall? People are still asking the same questions they've done ever since summer. They wonder why their loved ones went there for no reason in the middle of the night on the 4th of fucking July. It doesn't make sense to anyone. No one's got closure.

This place is a ghost town. They've killed people. They've made it uninhabitable, at least for some like your family. And it's not okay, none of it is. People need to know. Maybe they can't know everything, I'm not naïve. But they need to know more. We had to water it down last year, to get justice for Barb. But I think people can take more now. At least a bit more than the watered down version. People have started to question the government, to lose faith in it. But they deserve to know just how evil and twisted it truly is.

I know we can't tell everything. I don't want to tell anything that puts you or your family or anyone else in danger. But we have to tell more. Open the curtain a little more. I don't know how yet, but I'm going to do it once I've figured out how to. But I can't do it without you, I won't do it without you. Because we're a team. And I know it doesn't sit right with you either. I need your help. What do you think we can do? What can we expose? What should we expose? Please think about it and get back to me. Yes I know it will be dangerous but I've thought about it and we can and should do more. It just can't be like this.

I love you.

Your Nancy

After school she drives the kids to Family Video. She puts the letter in a post box across the street before walking after the kids into the video store. The kids are as always crowding in the sci-fi section bickering over which movie to rent. She casually strolls around the other shelves, letting her gaze mindlessly wander around them while she waits. Not really taking anything she sees in as her mind is preoccupied with the question of what to do, how they could go about opening the curtain more.

"Looking for anything special?" A voice suddenly asks from behind her. She turns around to find Keith there. He's always kind of given her the creeps, she's felt him staring at her before, when she's taken the kids here or before that to the arcade, or seeing him in school or

just in town. He's always stared, never really talked to her before. Presumably seeing her first with Steve and then with Jonathan made him keep his distance.

"Not really, just waiting for the knuckleheads to decide."

"You just let them pick the movie, no input?"

"Well I'm not going to watch it with them."

"Oh, right. Of course," Keith quickly answers. Pausing briefly he looks her up and down and seems to make his mind up about something. He runs a hand through his greasy hair and stands up a bit straighter before continuing. "Well, so in that case, you're free tonight?"

"Uh... not really."

"Come on, let me take you out, we can go to The Hawk. I'll let you pick. Anything you want, you can choose something girly and I won't mind, I'm not like those other guys."

"No thank you."

"Come on, give a guy a chance. I know I'm not what you usually go for but you gotta appreciate I'm going out on a limb here and it takes some guts to do so."

"Okay...? Um, still no."

"Why not? Come on..."

"Well, for one I have a boyfriend..."

"Byers? Didn't he move away?"

"Yes? And? He's still my boyfriend."

"Come on-"

Really tiring of Keith and this whole thing now, she interrupts him.

"Listen, Jonathan's still my boyfriend even though he doesn't live here anymore. And even if he wasn't my boyfriend the answer — which I

shouldn't have to give you three times — would still be no. Even if we were the last two people on earth the answer would still be no, Keith."

"Swing and a miss, Keefer," Steve, who's just appeared from the back, calls out. "And no use to even go up to bat at against that, Byers and her are like peanut butter and jelly."

She has to think twice about his metaphor but she thinks it's a compliment.

"Sticky and sickeningly sweet?" Robin, who's joined Steve behind the counter, butts in.

"I meant belong together!" Steve retorts, looking at her. That's sweet, she appreciates that. They've come a long way in a year.

"Sure, sure. Anyway, you need to learn to take a fucking hint, Keith. A girl tells you no the first time she's not gonna tell you anything else the third time and she shouldn't be hassled with the question again and again," Robin lays out.

She doesn't know Robin all that well, never really hung out with her at school even though they're in the same grade. They still don't talk a lot at school even though they share this secret now, just polite greetings and sometimes little small talk. It's weird to try and strike up a friendship out of nothing more than the fact that they almost died together with their mutual friend...s. Steve let slip that Robin apparently used to think she was "a priss" but that "the whole mall... battle changed her mind". She's not sure what gave Robin the impression that she was "a priss" but hey. She's also still not sure just what the relationship between Steve and Robin is, Steve insists they're just friends and they sure don't seem like anything more than that but she never thought Steve would be the kind of guy who'd just be friends with a girl and nothing more.

"We'll take these two," her brother interrupts, placing *Gremlins* and the third *Star Trek* movie on the counter. Both of which she's sure Mike and his friends have seen at least three times before already.

"And this," Dustin cuts in, heaping a huge pile of candy onto the

counter. "Family and friends discount?" He adds, winking at Steve.

"Fine," Steve rolls his eyes and starts ringing it all up.

"There is no discount, Harrington! Come on!" Keith protests.

"Oh come on dude, you're gonna get all pissy just because you struck out with Nancy? That's so lame," Lucas throws back.

"Yeah, real lame. And gee, a real mystery why girls don't like you. Who wouldn't like a lame, Cheeto-smelling cheapskate who can't take no for an answer?" Max adds.

Keith mutters something under his breath and shuffles off into the back. Steve rings them up.

"You alright Nance?" He asks while hammering away at the register.

"I'm fine."

"How's Byers doing in St. Louis?"

"Alright I guess," she shrugs. "Not worse than this ghost town. But imagine being the new kid in school in the middle of senior year and everyone knows you're from *here*."

"Ouch, yeah that's gotta be rough. And Byers whole blending into the background routine..."

"... didn't go that way really no. God I wish it was Thanksgiving already so I could just go there."

Steve nods and they say goodbye and head out. She drives home and heads up to her room while the kids all disappear into the basement. She tries to focus on homework but it's difficult with other things gnawing at her. After twenty minutes of not being able to focus on her essay for English at all she decides to just put it away for now and opens a new blank page in her notebook.

How to open the curtain and make people see the truth, and possibly tear down the government, without putting any of us at risk

Under no circumstances use anyone's real name or personal info when getting the story out there.

PRIVATE: Write down the full story of what's actually happened. Only show it to the people who know. Then work out what from that we can expose and how without 1) Risking anyone's safety 2) Risking people not believing it.

To do:

Do more research into the Lab. Learn everything about it and the projects. El is 11. What happened to 1-10?

Keep watch of the Lab and the whole town for suspicious activity.

Find out everything possible about the Russians. Research. Talk more to Steve and Robin about it. Joyce and Murray.

Evidence we have: Our tape, Jonathan's photo, Dustin's tape of the Russian message.

Can we get more evidence? What's left at the Lab? And the mall?

Witness accounts... there are 13 of us who know the real story. We can always back each other up if it comes to that...

She puts her pen down and thinks. She needs to check out the Lab. She needs to go to the library to do research. There must've been things written about the Lab before all that happened. She needs to talk to Steve and Robin about the Russians and the mall. And Joyce and Murray. And she needs to talk to El. About the Lab. About what her number means.

Writing down all she knows about everything that's happened is a daunting job, but she figures that's where she can begin. She can fill in more of what she doesn't fully know later. She just wants to get it all down on paper, to organize for herself if nothing else. She figures it's good to have a framework to work from, to subtract from. That's how she figures they should work on getting more of the truth out there. She knows she can't share all this right away, but having it all down they can then work out what they can start with. She's not sure just where to begin though. So much has happened over the last

three years. But really it started long before that. Finally she decides to just start with Will's disappearance, because that's where it really all started for her. It's an arduous process, it takes her hours to work through it all. She's at it until her mother calls that dinner is ready, and resumes it after.

"Yeah, they say hi too. So, how's Hawkins?"

"Eh, like it is. Ghost town. Except for the reporters still coming from out of town. Did you see the Cutting Edge report?"

"Yeah."

"I still see reporters everywhere, at what's left of the mall, and at city hall and stuff. If only they knew the real story."

"Yeah."

"Imagine if we just told it, just wrote down all that really happened."

"Hah, yeah. People wouldn't believe us."

"Yeah I know. But still, I keep thinking about it. And like, given all that's happened, what's being told now... maybe people would believe at least a bit more. Of the real story. I wonder what would happen if we opened the curtain a bit more."

"What did you have in mind?"

"I don't know I... Never mind. We maybe shouldn't... maybe we should talk about something else, something less depressing."

"Yeah..."

This could be something, perhaps. Worth bringing to attention at least. She presses the button to call her supervisor over and rewinds. He comes over and listens to it. Nods.

"Isolate this part and make a copy. Is the call still ongoing?"

"Yes, subject changed back to mundane things though."

"Keep on it and let me know if anything else of note comes up."

"Will do. Here's the copy."

"Nice work. I'll take it from here."

2. Chapter 2

"I don't think it's anything to be overly concerned about."

"You don't think it's a matter to be concerned about?"

"*Overly* concerned."

"Mr. Owens-"

"*Dr.* Owens."

"Considering the position you are in, if I were you I wouldn't be taking anything here lightly."

"What is that supposed to mean, Bellows?"

"Considering your previous failings in keeping this contained, you should thank your lucky stars you still have a job. And you should take it more seriously."

"Hey I've kept it contained. People don't know the truth of what's happened."

"You were fooled by a couple of teenagers. And now the same teenagers are thinking about exposing us."

"They haven't exposed anything real."

"They forced us to shut down HNL."

"Yes but they couldn't get the real story out there then. And they won't be able to now. And I did deal with the aftermath. I struck a deal with Chief Hopper to keep things quiet in exchange for that girl and-"

"And where is he now? He's gone. Are you counting on two impulsive teenagers to keep this vow of silence?"

"Are you counting on two impulsive teens to bring down the government?"

"Why not? With you as our first line of defense it doesn't seem all that difficult."

"You are out of line, Bellows. I don't know where you get off talking to me like-"

"I am not your subordinate, *Doc*. As you may recall, the Director put me here to make sure you don't screw us all over again."

"This is just a hot-headed teenage girl. I'm sure she won't get anywhere with it. And I'm sure the people who know what happened are keen to keep silence. For their own sake."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

"I am not, *Sammy*. You can never be too sure in this business. Do you know the best way to uphold a silence?"

"You tell me, *Georgie*."

"Silence *them*."

"We can not have any more blood shed in Hawkins. For god's sake it's still national news, all the deaths, and we have one degree of separation from it."

"Something needs to be done."

"I will monitor the situation. And if needed, I will do... something. I will... send her a message."

"A message?"

"A very clear message. If needed."

"I will report to the Director, *Sammy*. Fuck this up and I know someone else who'll be silent soon enough."

"Do not threaten me. I'll take care of it."

"You better. Oh by the way, speaking of your deal with that dead

cowboy cop. Why honor a deal with a dead man?"

"What do you mean?"

"The girl. He's gone. You let her go to him. He is gone now. Why isn't she with us?"

"Okay guys there we go..." he mumbles as he sets the plate of waffles down in the middle of the table.

"Thank you Jonathan," El says as she instantly nabs one and sets on her own plate. Will follows suit.

"Mom, breakfast!" He calls out to the other room as he sits down. He can hear her rummaging around.

"I'm coming sweetie I just have to find my keys. I can't be late for work when I just have barely started!" She calls back.

"Syrup," El says and gets up to get the bottle from the pantry. She returns to the table with both it and mom's keys.

"They're in here, El found them!" He calls out.

His mom appears in the doorway with a cigarette between her lips, buttoning her new job shirt with the QuikTrip logo on the back.

"Oh thank you sweetie, where were they?" She says as she strides over to El, kissing the top of the girl's head while taking the keys.

"Pantry," El answers while drowning her waffle in syrup.

"How do you manage to put your keys in the pantry?" Will asks.

"I don't even know honey. I was frazzled when I got home last night and I grabbed a snack, must've put them down there without thinking," she sighs while sitting down.

"Why don't you put your keys in the bowl by the door when you come home like Jonathan always does?" El in her straightforward manner asks.

"That is an excellent question, sweetie. I wish I had answer. I guess it just escapes me."

The conversation floats into background noise for him then. He doesn't mean to zone out, he usually doesn't, but his mind is preoccupied with Nancy and the letter he got from her yesterday. He's not really surprised, in a way he's been waiting for something like this. Because he knows Nancy pretty well, he must say, and he knew it wouldn't sit right with her, everything. To just leave it like this. After all hell broke loose again last summer they talked about it, what would happen next, how it would be kept under wraps now. And carefully observed as the government tried to smooth it all over. Already then it didn't sit right, Nancy voiced much of what she brought up again now in her letter. This stuff then kind of took the backseat when his mom informed them she was selling the house and they were moving from Hawkins.

So he's not surprised. And he knows she's right. She's right in that it's not right that people don't know the truth. And she's right to want to tell it. And she's right in that it doesn't sit right with him either. She knows him just as well as he knows her. That's what makes them a good team. Which they still are, like she said. And always will be. But him being here and she being there now complicates things. He wants to be there for her. But also-

"Jonathan?"

"Yes?" He looks up from his plate to find three pairs of eyes staring at him.

"School," El says.

"Oh, right," he glances at the clock on the wall and gets up as the others do to clear the table.

"What were you thinking about?" Will asks.

"Um..."

"Nancy," El says.

"... yeah," he admits and catches his mother looking a bit forlorn

before putting a smile on her face. He knows she knows that he didn't really want to move. He understands his mother's reasons for it, and has supported her of course, helping her with everything, but still he's allowed to not be thrilled about leaving Nancy behind in the middle of their senior year.

It's not like he misses Hawkins per se, he wanted to get out too. But with Nancy. They'd been dreaming about it, talking about it for months, much in the abstract of course but also pretty seriously. About just going, after graduation. Anywhere. To college or just, anywhere, out of there. Together. Of course there would've been kinks to work out, mainly that he'd need to be sure his family was taken care of, but leaving Hawkins in the dust with Nancy was an attractive prospect. He's always wanted to get out of there, ever since he was little. But he didn't want to leave without her.

"Are you mad at mom about the move?" Will asks him in the car.

"No. I just miss Nancy," he answers. Will nods. "Are you?" He asks.

"A little... not really... I miss everyone. And I hate being the new kid."

"I miss them too. I wanted to go to school with Mike. And you and Max and Lucas and Dustin," El chimes in from the backseat.

"I get that," he says. "And mom gets it. But she had her reasons. Let's just make the best of it. It's only been a few days, maybe it'll get better," he continues though he doubts it.

He can only hope it can get better in the way that he might be able to blend in more at school soon. It's a big school, like at least twice as big as Hawkins High, so he sees his chances of becoming just a face in the mass and hopefully be left alone. But that's the least of his worries. It won't ever be good at this place because it won't ever be with Nancy. He can't wait for Thanksgiving, when he gets to see her. Can't wait for senior year to be over so they can do whatever they want.

He has lunch in the darkroom. He's opted for that or his car every day so far, much like in Hawkins. It used to be fine, getting some

peace and quiet, but now it just makes him miss Nancy even more since he over the past year got used to her having lunch there with him, half the time barging in on him when he'd be in the middle of developing some photos. Which was kind of a pain but not really because it was Nancy and she'd later kiss him to make up for it.

Nancy asked him over the phone the first night after the move to send her photos of the new house, his new room, St. Louis and all so that's what he's working on now. He's just hung up the last of them, and with his sandwich already finished but lunch not over yet he figures he should use the time to write back to Nancy. She's right, they can never be too careful about who's listening.

Dear Nancy

I love you too.

And I know, I know you're right, I know we have to do more. People need to know. It doesn't sit right with me and I knew it didn't with you either. I'm with you 100 %. Always. We're always a team. No matter where we are in the world.

I know people don't buy the story they peddled about the mall. Do you want to focus on that? I don't know what we can say about what really happened. We need evidence. What evidence do we have? Our tape, the photo of the Demogorgon. Do we have anything about the mall? Dustin's tape? Can we do anything more with that? There's things on the tape we didn't use the first time, when we cut it down with Murray.

I wonder how big the conspiracy really is.

I think of it as twofold, what we have to do... please correct me if you see it differently but I think we need to 1) Really open people's eyes to how evil this government really is. 2) Give people some better closure about the people who died this summer. Like last time, it was to close down the lab but also to give Barb's parents some closure...

We need to be smart about this. We need to have as much evidence as we can, but we barely have any... And know what to leak, and when, and how. And we need to think about possible consequences. I'm not saying don't do it, I'm just saying, we need to think about it from all angles and

be prepared for anything that can happen.

Please be careful. You're so brave, and headstrong and I love that about you, so much. But please, be careful too.

"What are you writing?"

The sudden question from Amy breaks his flow. Amy's one of the other students at the school who utilizes the darkroom, and the other one apart from himself who takes refuge in here during lunch. She's quiet, like him, he'd kind of forgotten she was even there. They've both been content to work on their respective things in silence, which he appreciates. She was in here the first time he was here too. They haven't really talked more than introducing themselves to each other quickly.

"Oh, uh, it's a letter. To my girlfriend."

"Oh. Cool. She still in Hawkins?"

"Yeah. The photos are for her too, she wanted to see how I have it here."

"Cool. You miss Hawkins?"

"I miss her, a lot. I don't really miss anything else about it though."

"I bet. Is it true that the ground and water supply is toxic there?"

"Um... no... I mean I don't know..."

"Did you know anyone who died?" Amy seems nice enough but he could do without these questions.

"... yes. Look I uh, I don't wanna talk about it really," he cuts off.

"Oh, sure. Whatever, sorry," the girl apologizes.

"No it's alright. Just uh, well. Um anyway..." he doesn't know what to say really, he hates how awkward he just made it but he really doesn't want to talk about it. With her.

He finishes his letter, she continues to develop her photos.

Will's in a bad mood, he can tell as soon as he gets to his car after school where Will and El are already waiting for him. They don't see each other much during the actual school day, just if they pass each other in the hallways. Because even though he still counts Will as his best friend (or well, Nancy kind of is but she's also his girlfriend which makes it different) and he doesn't care about his reputation at school, still being seen hanging around his younger siblings would probably give him some unwanted attention. Plus he's pretty sure Will and El would like to fit in better than he's ever done, and being seen with their weird older brother would work against that he's sure.

"Hey buddy, what's up?" He asks as he unlocks the car and they all get inside.

"Ugh," is Will's first response as he sinks deep into the passenger seat.

"They know," El pipes in from the backseat.

"Who knows what?"

"Kevin Girardi, a boy in our grade-" Will starts to explain.

"A mouthbreather," El fills in.

"- yeah, he's cousins with Jared Pearson who was the year above me back in Hawkins, and Jared told Kevin all about everything... me being missing, Zombie Boy, all of it... and Kevin told everyone else. So now I'm Zombie Boy again and everyone stares at me."

"And me," El adds. "He said Jared said I'm weird and a secret bastard child Hop kept hidden. What's a bastard child Jonathan?"

"Ugh... um... it's... never mind that, you're not, in any case. That sucks guys. That really sucks."

"I miss my powers. I would've made him wet himself," El mutters.

"What's the point of getting out of Hawkins if it's just gonna be the same thing here? Everyone staring at us like we're freaks," Will says.

"I don't know guys just... it's safer here. And it's easier for mom at least, that's something. You know how hard it was for her in Hawkins."

"Yeah... but at least we had our friends there... you had Nancy. This place sucks, it's just like Hawkins except we're alone."

"Hey... well... yes I miss Nancy and I know you miss your friends but it's not as bad as Hawkins otherwise... look at least there's no lab here, no government spooks trying to kill us, no Russian spies, no monsters..." He tries.

"How do you know?" Will throws back.

"... Okay I guess I don't know for sure, but at least nothing so far, right? Or do you feel something? Or you El?"

"No..."

"No..."

"Good. So that's something at least. Look, it sucks, I'm not trying to say otherwise. I'm just saying... we've got each other at least, and school sucks but we can still talk to our friends and we'll get to see them over the holidays at least. Believe me I know it sucks but, I've been miserable at school for like... every year except the last one... so trust me I know that it sucks but that you can... persevere. School's only so many hours of the day... try to get through it together and then we can try to have fun after at least. St. Louis is at least a real city unlike Hawkins, there's bound to be more things to do here. I saw a cool looking record store to yesterday, wanna check it out?"

"Sure."

"Yes!"

When they get home from the record store his mom is on the phone with someone.

"- it's alright, pay is a bit better than at Melvald's even, then again St.

Louis is more expensive. And my boss is kind of a jerkwad. But there's a good store I found that- oh he just walked in now, I'll let you two ... oh it was so nice to catch up with you too sweetheart ... yes, definitely. And say hi to your mom for me!" His mom beckons him over and holds out the receiver. "It's Nancy!"

"Hey," he says into the receiver as his mom vacates the room, taking Will and El with her to give him privacy.

"Hey," the softest and nicest voice in the universe answers.

"What's up?"

"Oh, nothing much, I just missed you. Missed your voice."

"I miss you too."

"So you just got home?"

"Yeah, I took Will and El to this record shop I found after school."

"Oh that's nice. Get anything good?"

"Just browsed. But El got a Blondie single. So your influence is not lost on her..."

"Ooh, which one?"

"*War Child*."

"Nice. How is she and Will?"

"Eh, school was rough. Apparently someone in their grade has a cousin from Hawkins so word has spread now about... Will and everything."

"Oof, that's no good."

"Yeah."

"How is it for you?"

"I mean... alright I guess, like I said before, blending in to the

background hasn't gone as I hoped. Tried to hide in the darkroom during lunch but had to endure some questions there too, but I cut it off."

"Questions from who?"

"Oh, Amy. She's one of the others who use the darkroom a lot. Unlike Hawkins I can't have it for myself most of the time," he chuckles. "And I don't think she meant any harm, she's alright. But at least it's a big enough school that I can be kind of invisible. I just miss the hell out of you."

"I miss you a lot too. I feel... so alone here now."

"I'm sorry."

"Not your fault."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

"I sent some photos to you in the mail today, like you asked," he tells her. The little pause before she answers tells him she understood what he left out, that there's a letter accompanying the photos. He's kind of amazed by how it feels like they sometimes can have silent conversations, like they can tell what the others thinking and they don't have to say anything.

"Ooh, can't wait! You're gonna give me the grand tour of St. Louis when I visit right?"

"Of course. Just gotta find my own way around first."

"It must at least be cool to live in a real city."

"Yeah, if it weren't for the fact that Hawkins has you, this place would be vastly better."

"Aw. Hawkins without you is literal hell on earth. By the way, did I tell you that slimeball Keith at the video store tried to hit on me?"

"No. Gross. Do I need to come over and put his head in the returns box?"

"Hah, as much as I love the prospect of you coming here, I don't think it's needed for that reason. I told him off. And Max did. And Robin, even. He backed off."

"Good for him, since you could pretty much kill him with just your thumb."

"Hah, yeah I... hang on," Nancy pauses and he hears her yell at Mike in the background. "Sorry. I... wait," More yelling. "God, I'm about to try that on Mike soon if he doesn't shut up I- oh for gods sake, hang on." He hears how she puts the phone down, undoubtedly to march over to Mike for a final confrontation. After some rustling, Nancy yelling and Mike yelping, she returns to the phone. "Sorry about that."

"No worries, is he still alive or do I have to deliver some news to Will and El?"

"Hah, he's still breathing. He's annoying the crap out of me, wants me to get off the line so he can talk to El."

"Ah."

"I might have to give you your own phone line for Christmas."

"I'll make sure to still act surprised even though you spoilt it for me now," he jokes. He glances behind him, feeling watched and finds El in the doorway looking at him. "But maybe we should free up the line for them, El wants to talk to him too."

"Right, maybe we should. Tell her I said hi and that I'll bring her more Blondie records at Thanksgiving."

"Will do."

"Talk to you later?"

"Yeah. Love you."

"Love you too, bye."

He can't sleep. He can't stop thinking about it all. Monsters, the Lab, searching for Will, El, Barb and Bob. Hopper. Getting justice for Barb with Nancy. Getting the truth out there. He can't seem to shut off his brain, thinking of what they can do more. What are the possibilities? What are the risks? He misses Nancy more than ever now. He really doesn't like that they're separated now, he worries about her. It feels safer when they're together.

Knowing he won't be able to get to sleep right now when his mind is racing like this he decides to get up and get a glass of water. He walks silently down the hallway he's still getting used to so to not wake the others, but as he nears the kitchen he sees a light is on in there.

"Mom, what are you doing up?"

"Oh, Jonathan," she looks caught out, whipping her head around at the sound of his voice and then trying to hastily put out her cigarette and gather up all the papers and newspaper clippings spread out on the table. But she can't do it quickly enough, he takes one sweeping glance of the table and sees newspaper clippings with Department of Energy and Dr. Martin Brenner in them and lots of what looks like case files or reports, and a bunch of video tapes.

"What are you doing with this? Lab stuff?"

"No it's not um..." his mom tries to deny it.

"It says so on the box," he points out, pointing at the box labeled HAWKINS LAB that's set on a chair.

"Oh, right..." his mom sighs. "Well it's... stuff Hopper left. Stuff we found when we were searching for Will, and more research he did on his own."

"Okay. Why are you going through it now?" He asks as he sits down next to her.

"Just um... well I know I said moving here would give us a fresh

start... and it will! But I'm not completely done with... that place."

"What do you mean?"

"I've been meeting Murray. It's not far from Sesser to here so he's made the drive. Had lunch with him today. To talk."

"About...?"

"Finding Hop."

"Hopper?" He's taken aback by that. "Mom he's... gone..." He treads lightly, knowing how rough it's been for his mother, in a year she lost both Bob and Hopper.

"Yes, he is but... in what way?"

"What do you mean?"

"I was there, Jonathan. And you're right, he's gone, he just... vanished. I know he might be dead. I mean, most likely is but... considering everything that's happened... until I see a body, a *real* body, I can't be sure," his mom lays out, undoubtedly thinking of when they thought Will was dead, even saw what they thought was his body, but he was still alive just... in another place.

"You think Hopper is in the Upside Down?"

"Maybe... or somewhere... he must be somewhere. Even with the explosion he can't have just evaporated right?"

"Right... maybe um... why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want to bother you with this too, you do so much already, too much. And what with the move and all I know you're not happy, leaving Nancy behind, I'm so sorry, but..."

"It's okay, mom. I wish you'd told me. If you think there's a chance he's still out there, I believe you. You've always been right about this stuff."

"Thank you sweetie. And I really am sorry about the move, but we

couldn't stay there. I just couldn't..."

"It's okay mom, I know. And I get your reasons for it, I totally get it I promise. I mean, I'm not gonna pretend it doesn't suck, being here when Nancy is there but I get it."

"Thanks sweetie. Just a few more months and then you graduate and then you can go wherever you want with Nancy. I want you to."

"We'll see..."

"We will, seriously don't you dare stick around here to take care of us, you've done so more than enough. You have to live your own life too."

"Right. So, Murray?"

"I know, he's a bit of a nutjob but he's bang on about some things, and he's good with this stuff, exploring different theories."

"Yeah, I know. When me and Nancy went to him we thought he was just a crazy old dude wasting our time at first but he turned out to be of real help."

"Right. It's still amazing, what you did then, Jonathan."

"Well, what Nancy did, it was her idea all the way."

"But you did it with her, Jonathan. You were there for her. I don't think she could've done it without you. In fact I know so, she told me so."

"Oh. Well... well she'd been there for me before so..."

"You'll always be there for each other."

"Yeah... but um, speaking of that... and her and all this... Nancy and I have been talking about... doing it more."

"Doing what more?"

"Exposing more. Nancy sent me a letter, we didn't want to talk about

over the phone, just in case... I sent her a letter back today. She wants to get more of the truth out there. Of what's happened. To give people closure, to let people know what... what's real. What the government has done. What's really going on. That bullshit mall fire story doesn't make sense and everyone in Hawkins knows something fucked up happened but not what. It's not right."

"No, it isn't... but what can we do?"

"I don't know, Nancy and I are thinking about it. Nancy thinks that, well to get justice for Barb we had to water down the real story but given everything else that's happened since... she thinks people might be willing to believe more of the real story now."

"Hm. That's true..."

"So... we're gonna do it. Somehow. I don't know just how yet, but we will do it because Nancy's set her mind to it..."

"...which means it will get done," his mom nods. "Just be careful."

"I know, we will. We don't want to risk anyone's safety. But we have to do what's right," he lays down. His mom smiles at him.

"That's what I love most of about you sweetie."

"Uh, erm, what?"

"That you're so good. The most kindhearted, best man in the world. That you want to do good and that you always want to protect us."

"Oh... um, thanks. I love you too mom."

"Tell Nancy I can help, we will help, anyway we can. This stuff," she gestures to all the documents and tapes and clippings and photographs on the table, "may be of use."

"Thanks mom. I will. And we will help, with Hopper."

"I know."